

**“You Will See Greater Things Than These” by Travis Poling
Richmond Church of the Brethren, preached 2 August 2009**

“You will see heaven opened
and the angels of God ascending and descending
upon the Son of Man.”
Jesus prophesied that his followers would encounter
these luminous messengers of God
bringing heaven down to earth—
and carrying earth upward to heaven.
Jesus' followers saw their teacher as a divine messenger,
an intermediary between
the created order and the realm of the divine.
God's presence came, and comes to earth through Jesus
like angels descending Jacob's ladder—
in a way that can't really be explained in everyday terms,
but needs expression nonetheless.
As is true today, everyone in Jesus' time and place
did not necessarily believe in angels,
but there are some encounters in the course of human life
that, for many, can not be explained otherwise.
Throughout my own life, I have heard a handful of people,
both friends and strangers, talk of seeing, even speaking with angels.
While I remained skeptical, a part of me always wanted to believe.
After all, I had never experienced anything
that disproved the existence of angels,
and I have curiously found myself drawn to paintings of angels.
When I was visiting Iona, Scotland last summer
with a class from Bethany,
our group spent part of a day in the National Galleries of Scotland
in Edinburgh.
One painting that drew my attention was
this painting by John Duncan on the worship center,
of the Celtic saint Brigid,
asleep and being carried by angels,
According to legend, she was taken from her convent in Ireland
to Bethlehem to attend the birth of Christ.
In the painting, she is accompanied by a seal and two gulls
as she floats over the foaming sea
in the arms of two large angels through a deep red and blue sky.

Brigid could be considered one who had a vision
of the presence of God so intensely and so beautifully

that she not only saw the angels,
but was resting in the arms of these very messengers of God.

How does such a vision take place?
How is God made known so powerfully
that we have no choice but to say,
“I saw an angel!”?

Jacob was not seeing things as clearly as before.
He had just tricked his blind father Isaac
into bestowing upon him
the blessing that belonged to his brother Esau.
Jacob was fleeing through a barren land,
frightened and exhausted.
As the sun set, he just wanted to get some sleep.
Anywhere would do.

Finding the nearest stone, Jacob turned it over
and laid his head upon it as a pillow.
Jacob may have spent time in this wilderness before,
but this time was different.
If it were me, fleeing for my life
I know I would jump at every movement,
every little shadow and trick of light.
It is doubtful I would sleep that well,
and if sleep did come, it would be a troubled sleep.
But Jacob was looking for more than rest,
he was yearning for reassurance that his life would be spared.
I can imagine Jacob looking for natural protection
behind large rocks,
or hunting for food across the plains.

A boulder he would have passed right by before
was now a large structure to hide behind.
A tree he might not have noticed earlier
now provided shade, fruit, or a bird's beautiful song
to soothe his troubled spirit.
Jacob saw his surroundings in a new light,
and as he slept, God was revealed as the provider
of the rocks and trees and creatures
that would sustain his journey
and prolong his life.
Angels, Jacob dreamed, were coming down to earth
from the heavens,
bringing with them the presence of the Living God,
who stood beside Jacob and vowed

that he would return to this very place
 where heaven and earth intersected,
 that he would be safe, that he would prosper,
 that he and his descendants would be blessed—
 and be a blessing to others.

Jacob awoke, and turned over again the stone
 he had laid his head upon.
 Anointing it with oil, he marked this ordinary rock as sacred,
 out of the ordinary, or in more spiritual terms,
 a place, even house, of God within the ordinary.

George MacLeod, founder of
 the international and ecumenical Iona Community
 once wrote this prayer that speaks powerfully of rocks and angels.

“Invisible we see you, Christ beneath us.
 With earthly eyes we see beneath us stones and dust
 and dross, fit subjects for the analysts' table.
 But with the eyes of faith, we know you uphold.
 In you all things consist and hang together:
 the very atom is light energy,
 the grass is vibrant,
 the rocks pulsate.
 All is in flux; turn but a stone and an angel moves.”

Like Jacob,
 George MacLeod knew of the invisible yet palpable
 presence of the divine
 in what we would call ordinary—
 stones and dust and rubbish.
 We would not think to see these ordinary, lifeless items
 as vibrant with the Spirit of our Creator,
 but vibrant they are.
 As Jacob and MacLeod knew,
 if you look “with the eyes of faith,”
 turning a stone can unleash
 a whole world of angels.

Jesus told Nathanael,
 whom Philip had invited to
 “Come and see” the Messiah who lived
 in the ordinary, supposedly not too sacred town
 of Nazareth,
 “You will see greater things than these.

Very truly, I tell you,
 You will see heaven opened
 and the angels of God ascending and descending
 upon the Son of Man.”

Nathanael was happy enough that Jesus had recognized
 some spiritual gifts,
 that he was not like the others,
 that he, as Jesus told him, had “no deceit” within him,
 and all of this from observing him
 under a regular old fig tree one afternoon.

If Jesus can be revealed to us
 in things like rocks and dirt,
 imagine what he could reveal
 in this ordinary man of Galilee,
 or among our own relatively mundane lives.

God became human in Jesus Christ for a reason.

The opening to the Gospel according to John
 tells us of Jesus,

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
 and we have seen God's glory,
 the glory as of a father's only son,
 full of grace and truth...

From this fullness we have received
 grace upon grace.

The law was given by Moses;
 grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.

It is God the only Son,
 who is close to the Father's heart,
 who has made God known.”

The Word is how God communicates with us,
 the language God speaks—and that language
 is Jesus Christ.

How better to show us the presence,
 the grace and truth of God
 within this good and blessed creation,
 than by becoming one of us,
 and coming to us on our behalf?

Mother Theresa was famous for saying
 she found the face of Christ in the face of the poor

to whom she ministered.

God is with us

in the stone of Jacob,
and the atoms of the laboratory.

Christ is with us

in the shade trees and the beautiful birds
who live from their fruits,
and in our neighbor who sits under the tree
in the middle of the day, doing very little
but watching the birds.

All we have to do is turn a stone,
or feel the soil,
or listen to the cardinal singing on the telephone wire.

Our lives, like Jacob's, might be troubled from time to time,
yet we can still look with the eyes of faith,
as he did, and see the angels climbing Jacob's ladder.

We can walk into what we see,
have it become as real as sitting in this room,
and start climbing the ladder
along with the angels.

We can become messengers of God

along with them,
and reveal the presence of Christ to others
as we step up into the heavens,
and return back to the earth,
carrying our resting neighbors
through their dreams
to the place where Christ is born among us,
again and again.